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## **BIRDS PERCHED TO HELP DEP RESTORE SEAGRASS IN FLORIDA KEYS**

*--State Biologists reviving habitat in Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary--*

**FLORIDA KEYS NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY** – State and federal biologists began restoring damaged seagrass this week in the Florida Keys. Workers at two sites are using sediment to refurbish the natural gradient of the ocean floor, planting seagrasses and erecting roosting stakes to attract nesting birds that will naturally fertilize the repaired habitat.

“Restoring these underwater grasses damaged by watercraft will enhance water quality and protect marine life,” said Department of Environmental Protection Coastal & Aquatic Managed Areas Director Katherine Andrews. “Reviving critical habitat in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary highlights the benefits of biological improvements and also the importance of boating responsibly on Florida’s waterways,”

Seagrasses are flowering underwater meadows found in estuaries, lagoons and shallow, open shelves off Florida's coast. A critical marine habitat, the state’s estimated 2.7 million acres of seagrass meadows cycle nutrients, maintain water clarity, stabilize the ocean bed and provide a nursery area for much of Florida's recreationally and commercially important marine life.

Boating in seagrass beds can critically damage habitat, due largely to vessel engines, hulls and propellers. Seagrasses gouged by propellers can take a decade to recover. Boaters can take precautions to avoid running aground by becoming familiar with the local waters, using up-to-date nautical charts, following marked channels and staying in deep water.

The habitat restoration projects launched this week in the Upper Keys are the first of several by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary and U.S. Department of Commerce’s National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration.

Supporting one of the most unique and diverse assemblages of plants and animals in North America, the 2,800 square nautical mile Sanctuary surrounds the entire archipelago of the Florida Keys and includes the waters of Florida Bay, the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean. In 2001, Florida expanded the boundaries of the Sanctuary, designating the Tortugas Ecological Reserve and creating the largest underwater refuge in the Northern Hemisphere.

Over the last two decades, the Keys’ tourism industry has grown to more than four million domestic and international visitors, who drive, fly or cruise each year to the most accessible tropical paradise in the Caribbean Basin. The Keys support 82,000 full-time residents and sustain

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a multi-million dollar commercial fishing industry that harvests nearly 20 million pounds of seafood and marine products annually. Visit [www.dep.state.fl.us/coastal/seagrass/facts/](http://www.dep.state.fl.us/coastal/seagrass/facts/) for more information on seagrasses.

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